1994

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BYZANTINE INFLUENCES ALONG THE SILK ROUTE:
CENTRAL ASIAN SILKS TRANSFORMED

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Introduction
Silks traded along the ancient Silk Route were precious, light and easily transportable commodities that served as ideal vehicles for cross-cultural exchange.1 The survival of several hundred Central Asian silks variously datable between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, presents an opportunity to trace patterns of trade, diplomacy and cross-cultural developments at the heart of the Silk Road.2 These silks perfectly mirror contact, cross over and change fostered under the auspices of Mediterranean/Near Eastern economic and diplomatic exchange.

This paper will ask three questions:
1. What lay behind Byzantine influence in Central Asia along the old Silk Route?
2. What was the precise nature of the transformations which the Byzantine contact engendered?
3. What do these changes reflect about Byzantine silks as a medium for cross-cultural exchange?3

1. What lay behind Byzantine influence in Central Asia along the old Silk Route?
A Chinese source dated 606 A.D. entitled the, 'Report on the Western Lands', speaks of three main silk trade routes that linked China to the West:
   a. A northern route that was accessed through the Caucasian mountain passes
   b. A central route that passed through Sogdian territory and on to Persia and
   c. A southern route, which branched off into India and linked up to the sea borne traffic of the Indian Ocean.3

By 606 A.D. Byzantium laid great stress on encouraging trade via Central Asian intermediaries at Pei Kend in Bokhara on the central silk route. Here the Byzantines had access to Chinese goods including silks, which had been transported by Sogdian merchants from Sogdian trading posts at Lop Nor on the western Chinese border.

What was the background to this arrangement? First and foremost sixth century political and economic rivalry between Persia and Byzantium has to be mentioned.4 Secondly it should be noted that in the fifth to sixth centuries Byzantium was only just beginning to establish domestic sericulture within her Empire; initially in Syria and subsequently across Asia Minor.5 In part her industry still relied on imported raw silk supplies. The third relevant factor is that by the sixth century Persia came to hold a powerful position in regard to both the central and the northern silk trade routes. Access to the former was through Persia itself, whilst the latter was reached via Caucasian mountain passes heavily guarded by Persian troops. Matters came to a head when Byzantium refused any longer to pay tribute money to the Persians for protection of their garrisons stationed in the Caucasian passes. War between Persia and Byzantium was declared and this lasted from 572-591 A.D. Meanwhile, the southern silk trade route, which linked up to the sea borne traffic from China, was also under Persian domination.
Several attempts had been made to bypass Persian threats to Byzantium's foreign trade policy in the sixth century, notably a series of diplomatic alliances with Ethiopians (530s, 550s and later) Sogdians and Turks (568-581). Out of these negotiations Byzantium gained substantial trade agreements with the Sogdians along the central silk route to China, and for a time with the Turks along the northern silk route, although Persia continued to dominate Chinese sea borne trade on the southern silk route.

A caftan excavated in the Caucasus by Jeroussalimskaja reflects well the theatres of trade and war that linked Byzantine, Sogdian and Chinese interests. This garment (figure 1) displays a magnificent Byzantine senmurv silk for the body of a garment that employs both Sogdian and Chinese silks as linings. The design is comparable to that of the senmurv silk in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. More than seven hundred silks have been excavated in the western Caucasus and await publication. These silks stand as testimony to hitherto unimagined trading links between Byzantium, Central Asia and China between the seventh and the tenth centuries. Some forty to fifty Chinese silks are included amongst the finds from the western Caucasus. Recent years have also witnessed the discovery of Chinese silks in Chinese tombs, which by the tenth century show signs of western influence. The idea that China and the west were totally remote from one another during the central middle ages, may require a total revision as more finds are uncovered.

2. What was the precise nature of the transformations which Byzantine contact engendered?

The geographical diversity and breadth of distribution of the Central Asian silks is truly astounding. There are examples uncovered by Aurel Stein in walled up Buddhist caves at Chien fo-tung in China; other silks as described above, were excavated in the Caucasus, whilst many further examples survived as reliquary covers in ecclesiastical treasuries across Europe (in France, Holland, Belgium, Germany and Italy).

Although the rich Caucasian material will not be published until next year, the overall characteristics of Central Asian silk weaving from the seventh to the tenth centuries can be gleaned from the known surviving material. Dorothy Shepherd in her articles 'Zandaniji identified' (1959) and 'Zandaniji revisited' (1980) provided a valuable guide to Central Asian silk weaving of the seventh to the tenth centuries. In conjunction with Henning, she derived the name Zandana, a district of Bokhara in Central Asia, from a merchant's mark on the rear of a ram silk at Huy. A similar ram silk was discovered in the Aurel Stein walled Buddhist caves in China and this is now at the British Museum.

The Central Asian silks described by Shepherd fall into two technical groups:

i. weft faced compound twills with three to four main warps twisted z

ii. weft faced compound twills with paired, gummed, untwisted, main warps.

Silks of the first technical group include examples at Sens (figure 2), Aachen, Liege, Brussels, London, Rome and elsewhere. Silks of the second group encompass fabrics at Maastricht (figure 3), Lyon, Sens, Berlin and other centres.

Stylistically speaking, a characteristic of the silks is the use of toothed medallions to enclose animal and foliate motifs with markedly stepped outlines. The use of a specialised palette dominated by dark blue, pink interrupted by green, orange and browns, is also a noted feature of the silks. The general width of the pieces that retained selvedges is a little under 120cm. Distinctive weft fringes also appear on certain silks of the group.

Whilst emphasis quite rightly has been placed on identifying the unifying characteristics of the so-called 'Zandaniji' silks, perhaps insufficient attention has been given to the features on some silks of the two groups which clearly reflect penetration of foreign influences and transformations of local styles. For example, consider a series of little publicised Hunter silks at the British Museum in London (figure 4), at the Victoria and Albert museum in London, today lost but once at the Kunstgewerbe museum in
Düsseldorf, and at the Kunstgewerbe museum in Vienna. These all manifestly attempt to imitate Mediterranean Hunter silks such as the Byzantine Mozac Hunter silk or the Hunter silk lining the St. Ambrogio altar in Milan (figure 5). The distortion of proportions on the Central Asian horse and rider imitations illustrate the difficulties that the Central Asian weavers encountered in trying to interpret unfamiliar asymmetrical figurative motifs. The Central Asian colour palette similarly, begins to temper pink, orange and green, brown and dark blues with the bright reds, greens and blues of the Mediterranean. This liveliness of colour is true also of two Central Asian silks with horse motifs at Sens cathedral treasury (inv. 40 (figure 6), and inv.41) in red, green, mauve, yellow and white. On these silks, and on a Berlin Kunstgewerbe Museum, Horse silk, pearled medallions of a Byzantine kind have replaced the jagged toothed medallions characteristic of many Central Asian silks.

Some Sogdian silks from the Caucasus directly copy Byzantine Hunter themes, whilst other Sogdian silks elsewhere, display an odd mixture of Central Asian and Byzantine tastes. These include two silk fragments in Berlin with scenes of animal sacrifices. Here elements of Central Asian iconography are welded to Mediterranean foliate ornament and bright colour palette. Two further Central Asian silks, one in Cologne and the other in Berlin's Kunstgewerbe Museum, reveal rather an awkward adaptation of the human figure in the form of spandrel decoration accompanying medallions with paired horses.

The idea that Central Asian silk workshops did imitate specifically Byzantine motifs is substantially supported by the evidence of several silks. The eagle silks at Lyons (figure 7) and at Sens for example, hark across to Imperial Byzantine eagle motifs (figure 8). Here the Central Asian favoured russet and tan dyes have been retained in spite of the imported motifs.

A Central Asian Lion silk at St. Servatius, Maastricht (inv. 2) appears to be a direct copy of an Imperial Byzantine Lion silk of the type characteristically despatched abroad as part of Byzantine foreign diplomatic policy. This silk is a weft faced compound twill with main warps in three to fours twisted Z. Unlike the smooth Imperial paired main warp twills, its Lion has exaggerated outlines and unconvincing proportions. The delicate tree motif behind the Lions of the imperial pieces has become a vast angular structure on the Central Asian piece. The Byzantine lions measure around 70-80cms across, but the Maastricht lions measure only 24.5 cm. The Byzantine Lions are woven down rather than across the loom to accomodate their width in repeat form. The Maastricht lion proportions do not merit this treatment and so they are woven across the loom in the conventional manner. Perhaps it was a regular Central Asian feature to play safe with size when imitating a foreign model, for the Sens horse motif silks described above are only around 12cm. wide, whilst the medallions of characteristic Zandaniji lion silks such as the Ram silk from Huy reached proportions as wide as 35cm.

It is interesting to note that when Eastern Mediterranean motifs are imitated, the Central Asian weavers often tend to use the finer paired grège main warps. Perhaps the use of fine, paired untwisted grège silk warps, as opposed to the use of coarse twisted, triple and quadruple main warps (characteristic of Zandaniji group one silks) enabled the Central Asian weavers better to come to terms with the imitation of foreign motifs.

One may summarise Byzantine influence on Central Asian weaving as falling under three headings:

i. Direct imitation or overall amalgamation of Byzantine motifs
ii. Technical adaptation (to the main warps) to enable smoother contours characteristic of imported motifs to be imitated
iii. Modification of the traditional Central Asian colour palette largely based on ferrous dyes
3. What do these changes reflect about Byzantine silks as a medium for cross-cultural exchange?

These traces of Byzantine influence on Central Asian silk weaving of the seventh to the tenth centuries reflect more than mere technical and stylistic influences. Most vividly they suggest the power of the woven symbol as a transmitter of fashion across the mediaeval globe. For instance, Hunter themes became popular in Byzantium in the eighth to ninth centuries as part of the phenomenon of Iconoclasm.28 When figurative, religious subject matter was banned across the Byzantine Empire, Hunter and Charioteer iconography was extolled under the iconoclast Emperors. The adoption of Hunter motifs in Central Asia had nothing to do with Byzantine Iconoclasm but it did say much about the speed at which fashions travelled. However, not only fashion was at stake: the Imperial Eagle and Lion silks that inspired Central Asian imitation for example, embodied the power and the prestige of the Byzantine Empire.29 What did their adaptation in Central Asia represent? Was this an attempt to associate with the might of the Byzantine Empire?

On Byzantium's part, the use of silken diplomacy to secure Sogdian intermediaries for trade with China was part of a double edged sword. Not only did she ensure for herself a means whereby to supplement her domestic supplies of raw silk, but she also won an ally against her Persian enemy. The art of the use of Byzantine silks as powerful political weapons alongside their recognition as valuable economic assets, was perfected and exploited to great lengths by the Byzantines in the tenth to eleventh centuries.30 In this regard it can be said that the early Central Asian silken contacts described, clearly signalled greater things to come.

Finally, it is relevant to note that the Silk Road penetrated further east beyond China: its eventual destination of course, lay in Japan.31 As witness to this, the Shoso-in Buddhist temple repository in Nara, Japan, houses a wealth of silks dating back to the mid eighth century, a number of which bear the indelible mark of Byzantine influence.32 Even today, it would be difficult to cite a single fabric outside perhaps denim, that could be ranked equal to Byzantine silk in its ability to cross traditional geographical, religious and cultural boundaries and to influence taste on such a truly global scale.

Footnotes


9. Personal communication Dr. A. Jeroussalimskaja, Keeper of Textiles, Hermitage, St. Petersburg.


15. A. Muthesius, History of the Byzantine Silk Industry, chapter 10 sections 1 and 2 entitled respectively, Shepherd and Henning's group one Zandaniji silks, and, Shepherd's group 2 and group 3 Zandaniji silks, with references to articles in Russian by A. Jeroussalimskaja. The so far unpublished, excavated Sogdian material in the Hermitage, will be published under the auspices of the National museum Munich, by Dr. A. Jeroussalimskaja in 1995/6.


17. Ibid. chapter 7 entitled, Falke's so-called Alexandrian group of silks and some related pieces.


20. Dr. A. Jeroussalimskaja personal communication. The unpublished Sogdian silks include examples with Byzantine style Amazon motifs and with Byzantine like Hunter themes.


25. Ibid. 237ff.

27. The term grège refers to silk still in the gum. De-gummed silk used for warp threads was twisted to give it strength. Grège silk by way of contrast, could not be twisted in the same way because of its sericin gum coating.


30. This theme will be explored by the present author in a public lecture for the Early Medieval Textile Society, at a day of Byzantine papers in the British Museum, that will take place on April 11, 1995.


Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank the Pasold Foundation for a travel grant, the Textile Society of America for help towards expenses and Rex Gooch of Welhandy for the preparation of the text of this paper. The paper was prepared on equipment provided by Wingate Scholarships.

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